

Nicolas Ceccaldi Offers His Version of the Gospel at Basel

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Installation view of [Nicolas Ceccaldi](#)'s solo presentation at Art Basel Miami Beach.

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At a glance, it appears that Jehovah's Witnesses have set up a display in the Art Basel Miami Beach booth of Brooklyn gallery Real Fine Arts, as they often do at subway stations and on sidewalks. Two magazine stands are at the center of the display, though the publication they are offering is not the *Watchtower* or a related pamphlet, but a version of the Gospel of Judas as rewritten by Nicolas Ceccaldi, whose paintings—dark, spiritual, Symbolism-inflected enigmas—hang around the booth.

Free for the taking, Ceccaldi's publication, which has been released with

two different covers, is billed as a "simplified edition" of the text, and while I can't speak to its accuracy, exactly, the writing and story are pretty trippy, as tends to be the case in Gnostic gospels. Judas Iscariot (who betrays Jesus in the Bible) is described within as "brother of the leech, an insect which men feed at their own expense. This insect, which does not like wine but prefers blood, would be capable, by means of an occult power, of becoming big as an elephant and crushing men like ears of corn."

At the risk of giving too much away, most of the little book involves conversations between Judas, who has been having various wild visions (the other disciples have also been experiencing them), and Jesus, who is at one point busy digging his own grave. Judas asks to touch Christ's hair, which is "the finest I have ever touched in my life."

Seeing religious materials within a contemporary-art fair is fairly unusual, but as Real Fine Arts's proprietors, Tyler Dobson and Ben Morgan-Cleveland, pointed out to me, all art dealers are proselytizers in their own way, spreading the good news of their artists and aiming to make converts.

And there are elements of Ceccaldi's curious book that seemly perfectly calibrated to the cut-throat world of the art market. Near the end of the Gospel, we find Judas relaying a vision about the disciples stoning him, and Jesus offering some rather unorthodox advice: kill them first. Assuring Judas that this is a perfectly reasonable strategy, Jesus says, "Each should create their own justice. And if they do not, they are nothing more than an imbecile. Would you not love to dominate your fellow men someday? . . . Have you never heard of the great glory gained by victories? Yet, victories do not make themselves. Blood must be spilled, much blood, to accomplish them and lay them at the feet of the conquerers."